

BATTLE OF SYLHET

The Background

The two nation Theory, championed by the Muslim League, led to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. However, the two Wings of Pakistan, separated both geographically and culturally by 1600 km of Indian territory, failed to remain in harmony despite their religious homogeneity. The ethnic, linguistic, economic and cultural diversities between the two Wings could not be bridged by an emotional appeal to religion. Subsequently, visible drifts occurred between both sides.¹ The 1965 Indo-Pakistani War was primarily a conflict between India and Pakistan, but it created conditions that contributed to the rise of discontent in East Pakistan. The war highlighted the imbalance in political, military, and economic power between the two Wings of Pakistan. During the conflict, East Pakistan felt neglected as military resources were focused on the Western front, fuelling discontent.² The war's aftermath intensified demands for greater autonomy in East Pakistan, leading to the rise of the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which advocated for more political and economic rights. This growing discontent eventually led to the Six-Point Movement in 1966, calling for a federal structure granting more autonomy to East Pakistan.

By 1970, East Pakistan's demands culminated in the general elections, where the Awami League won a decisive victory. However, tensions escalated when the central government in West Pakistan, under Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, refused to transfer power to Sheikh Mujib. This failure to recognise the will of East Pakistan's people directly contributed to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, with the Pakistani military's crackdown on Bengali nationalists sparking the independence movement. This erupted in massive protests culminating in Operation Searchlight in March 1971, a brutal crackdown by the Pakistani military on Bengali civilians and political activists.³ This operation spurred a full-scale liberation movement in East Pakistan, with the Mukti Bahini conducting guerrilla operations and seeking support from India. In response to the escalating crisis and the influx of millions of refugees into India, the Indian government, led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, decided to intervene militarily.

Pakistan's Approach

The main objective of the Pakistani leadership was to suppress the popular movement and prevent the secession of East Pakistan. Ultimately, Pakistan's military strategy was simple and motivated by geographical compulsions and military preparedness in the two wings. On the Eastern side, their Army chose a defensive strategy wherein they wanted to delay the Indian Army's ingress and prevent the fall of Dhaka till active support from China and the USA had arrived or the intervention from the UN materialised. Likewise, forces and troops were deployed to the forward positions and selected strongholds.

¹ Prasad, S.N.& Thapliyal, U P. (2014). The India-Pakistan War of 197; A History. Natraj Publishers

² Sujjan Chinoy, Bakshi, B., & Chadha, V. (2022). 1971 India-Pakistan War. PENTAGON PRESS LLP.

³ Zakaria, A. (2019). 1971. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.

On the other hand, when it came to the West, an aggressive strategy was adopted by the Pakistani Army to capture as much Indian land as possible just to compensate for the losses, if any, incurred in the East.⁴ As far as the War was concerned, on the Eastern Front, the Pakistani Army followed a defensive strategy based on a three-tier concept of ‘defence-the out-posts’, the strong points and the fortress in which each tier supported the others. Initially, this strategy benefitted Pakistan, but it crumbled when India, instead of taking the Pakistani fortress head-on, started containing and bypassing them. This led to a quick march in Dhaka by the Indian Army. Finally, on 03 December 1971, the Pakistani Army launched an attack on India with pre-emptive strikes at 12 Indian Airports. India’s strategy at the Eastern Front was to adopt aggressive measures likely to facilitate the return of the refugees to their homes and a defensive one at the West to abstain Pakistan from occupying any Indian territory.

Sylhet: The Strategic Importance

Sylhet, a town located in the Northeastern region of what was then East Pakistan, played a significant role. Geographically, Sylhet is part of the Sylhet Division and lies close to the Indian border, which is bordered by the Indian states of Meghalaya, Assam, and Tripura. It is in a hilly and lush green region, with the Surma Valley running through the town, making it rich in rivers, tea gardens, and mountains. In 1971, Sylhet was an important location because it was one of the key towns in the eastern part of East Pakistan, well connected to Dhaka with rail and roadways and was located near the Indian border. Sylhet, due to its proximity to India, saw the influx of refugees fleeing from the violence of the war, as well as military movements and support for the independence movement. The region’s mountainous terrain and dense forest areas were used by resistance fighters (Mukti Bahini) to hide and launch guerilla attacks against the Pakistani military forces. The District of Sylhet was also heavily impacted by the political and military dynamics of the time. Though a region hub, the city faced significant challenges due to the ongoing conflict. Many residents supported the independence movement, and the region witnessed several clashes between Bengali nationalist forces and the Pakistani military.

By December 1971, as the Indo-Pakistani War officially began, Sylhet held considerable strategic and geographical significance during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, making it a critical target for both the Pakistani military and the joint forces of the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini. Strategically, Sylhet served as a key military garrison for the Pakistani Army, housing troops, artillery, and logistical resources essential for sustaining their operations in northeastern East Pakistan. Its command-and-control hub role allowed it to support defensive efforts across the region, making its retention vital for Pakistan to maintain operational coherence. Pakistan's objective was to retain control over Sylhet, which would help to maintain its foothold over the Northeast, prevent Indian advances and maintain supply routes and communication lines. Moreover, the defence of Sylhet has not just had a military edge but a

⁴ Lieutenant General Ghanshyam Singh Katoch (Retd). (2025). *The Other Side of the Hill: Reorganisations and Strategy for the 1971 War*. Publication. Retrieved January 17, 2025, from Usiofindia.org website: <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/the-other-side-of-the-hill-reorganisations-and-strategy-for-the-1971-war.html>

symbolic significance, too, reflecting Pakistan's determination to assert control over East Pakistan and promote resilience amid growing challenges.

For the Indian Army and Mukti Bahini, capturing Sylhet was pivotal to disrupting Pakistani military operations, severing communication and supply lines, and advancing toward Dhaka, the ultimate objective in the liberation campaign. Geographically, Sylhet's proximity to the Indian border provided a logistical advantage for Indian forces, facilitating troop movements and supply chains. The region's terrain, characterised by rivers, hills, and tea estates, presented natural challenges but also allowed the Indian Army to exploit innovative tactics such as heliborne operations to bypass traditional defences and achieve tactical surprise. Furthermore, Sylhet's position as a transport and communication hub underscored its importance, as controlling it would isolate Pakistani forces in the northeast and weaken their overall capacity to resist the liberation forces. Thus, Sylhet's capture represented both a strategic blow to the Pakistani military and a significant step toward the creation of an independent Bangladesh.

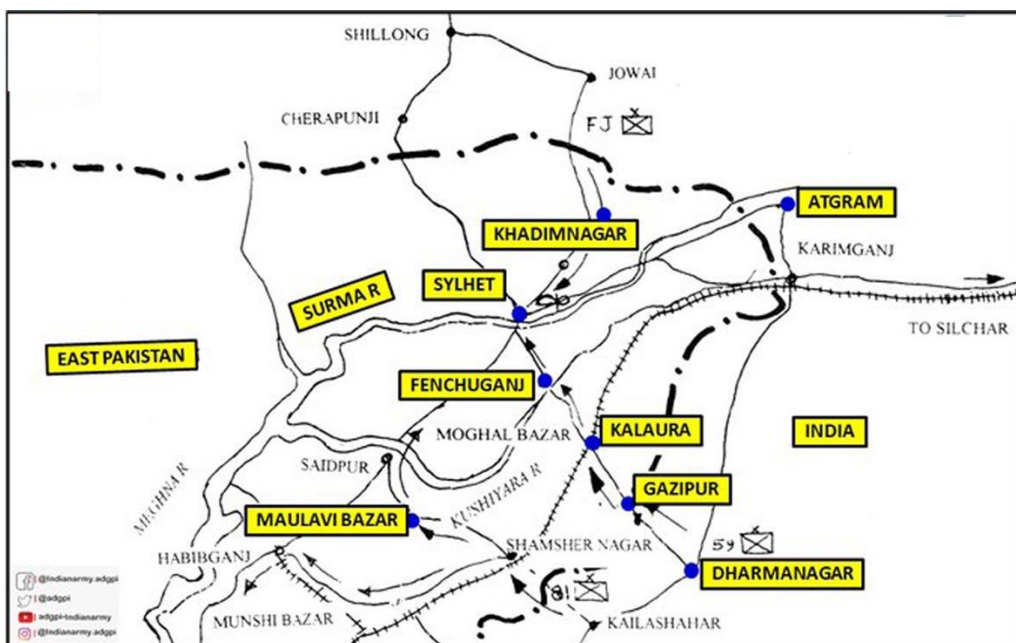
The Battle

Following the military crackdown in East Pakistan in March 1971, over one million refugees poured into India. The Government of India had decided in April 1971 to go to war to stop the genocide and to enable the refugees to return to their homes. As mentioned, Sylhet's strategic location and connectivity with Dhaka by rail and road doubled its importance for both nations at war. HQ IV Corps was deployed, and Lieutenant General Sagat Singh commanded the operation. 8 Mountain Div under Major General (later General) KV Krishna Rao led the operation. Before attacking Sylhet, some other places were captured by the Indian Army that were deemed necessary. However, General Rao's strategy involved an advance from the South. 59 Mountain Brigade formed with 4/5 GORKHA Rifles (FF), 9 GUARDS and 6 RAJPUTS was commanded by Brig CA Quinn and positioned at Dharamanagar, and 81 Mountain Brigade was positioned at Kailashahar. It was led by Brigadier RCV Apte and consisted of 3 PUNJAB, 4 KUMAON and 10 MAHAR. Pakistan had two Brigades of 14 Infantry Division stationed, led by Maj Gen Qazi Abdul Majid Khan at Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar, and Akhaura. 202 Infantry Brigade under Brig Salimullah was located at Sylhet and 313 Infantry Brigade at Maulavi Bazar. Brigadier Iftikhar Rana was the man in charge of 313 Inf brig, The third was located in Akhaura. General Rao aimed to cut off the Pakistani 202 and 313 Brigades to prevent their retreat toward Bhairab Bazar.⁵

The strategic advance for the capture of Sylhet was carried along three axes, with the E Force led by Brigadier M B Wadke advancing along Axis Jaintiapur-Muktapur-Darbast-Haripur-Sylhet. 59 Mountain Brigade was to advance along the axis of Dharamanagar via Gazipur through Kalaura, Fenchuganj and reach Sylhet. The axis along Kailashahar, Shamsheer Nagar, Munshi Bazar, Maulavi Bazar and Sylhet was the third way and was pursued by the 81 Mountain Brigade. The advance commenced with E Force reaching Karimnagar after brushing

⁵ Col Sarkar, B. (2020, December 8). Battle of Sylhet 1971 War. Retrieved January 17, 2025, from Indian Defence Review website: <https://indiandefencereview.com/battle-of-sylhet-1971-war/>

aside minor opposition and crossing a few water obstacles on 04 December. A major assault was launched under Major MN Sharma of Engineers that led to a seizure of the build-up area of Karimnagar by 10 December. Due to troops shortages, 5/5 GORKHA Rifles were joined by 380 FIELD COMPANY ex 108 ENGINEER REGIMENT. Similarly, 6 RAJPOTS under 59 Mountain Brigade after successfully capturing Gazipur, after a stiff fight with a few casualties retracted for a proposed offensive in Dhaka. Later, it was re-inducted on 05 December and took over the advance to Sylhet. It established a roadblock in the area Rajapur – Maheshjhuri on December 5/6, captured Halaichar on December 7 and caught up with 22 Baluch, the retreating Pakistani battalion, after a 45-km chase at Fenchuganj on 10 December. Lastly, due to its strategic location on the Silchar-Sylhet Highway, the 81 Mountain Brigade started advancing with a clear objective to capture Shamsheer Nagar first. The idea was to capture Shamsheer Nagar and the adjacent areas such as Chatalpur Tea Garden.



Key Location in the General Areas of Sylhet

Source: ADGPI

The Shamsheer Nagar and its airfield were captured by 4 KUMAON assisted by two Companies of 3 PUNJAB in a two-day battle on 06 December. While 3 PUNJAB captured the Muulavi Bazar, 81 Mountain Brigade moved towards the same and was welcomed with heavy shelling and air attacks. After the withdrawal of the Pakistani Army from Maulavi Bazar, Indian forces captured the area by 09 December, unopposed. With three side forces closing in, Sylhet was not far from being captured by India, and this sent Pakistani forces into panic mode. According to their radio intercepts, the plan for Pakistan was to take out its 202 Infantry Brigade from Sylhet and concentrate it at Ashuganj. It was difficult to accept that Sylhet was evacuated because it was a key defensive location that was part of General AAK Niazi's 'Fortress Concept' defensive strategy.⁶ India decided to prevent the pullout by Pakistan and capture

⁶ Cardozo, I. (2021). The Saga of Sylhet. *Strategic Analysis*, 45(6), 485–490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2021.1999695>

Sylhet through a heliborne operation as ordered by the Corps Commander Lieutenant General Sagat Singh.



Lieutenant General Sagat Singh and then Major General K V Krishna Rao -- later the army chief -- with Havildar Dil Bahadur Chettri at Sylhet during the 1971 War

Source: Eastern Command <https://x.com/easterncmd/status/1150388753338253315/photo/2>

4/5 GORKHA RIFLES was told that a helicopter for reconnaissance of the battleground would arrive at 0730 hours the next day and that the fly-in would commence at 1430 hours. The Battalion was also assured that it would be linked within 48 hours. However, The Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel AB Harollikar knew that the link-up within the specified time was most unlikely. He consulted his officers and men and took more ammunition than food, water and other administrative stores. So, all we had was a handful of shakarpara and our water bottles for water. Our big packs were left behind and all we could take to protect ourselves from the winter cold were our barsatis.⁷ The plan was to help-lift 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES while placing them on the Northern side of the Surma River, closer to the road cum rail bridge. This was because of the geographical location of Sylhet, a District Headquarters situated on both the banks of the Surma River connected by rail and road. Next, the 59 Mountain Brigade and E Force were to link up the with the Battalion within two days. Meanwhile, the 81 Mountain Brigade captured Maulavi Bazar and marched towards Sylhet.

Heli-Lift to Sylhet

⁷ibid

After securing information about Pakistan's sudden withdrawal from Sylhet, the Indian Army decided to heli-lift 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES and land it near Sylhet. With support from the Indian Air Force Mi-4 helicopters, India conducted the first-ever heli-lift operation of the armed forces at the eastern theatre.⁸ On 07 December, the Brigade Commander, the Group Caption Chandan Singh, and the CO 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES, selected a suitable landing site after an aerial reconnaissance. 14 Mi-4 helicopters landed near a spot on the Eastern Bank of the Surma River at Mirapur, close to the bridge.⁹ The heli-lift happened in two Phases, starting with 1500 hours to 1800 hours, and the next Phase was executed at 0300 hours on 08 December; the entire Battalion was landed (less some elements of the HQ) by 0800 hours, and it was Mi-4 helicopters from No.105 and No. 110 Helicopter Units conducting the operation.¹⁰ Some small arms firing, primarily moderate, eventually resorted to intense with subsequent landings happening.¹¹ This operation marked the first time using IAF helicopters to transport troops directly to the frontline. It is commendable that without any established procedures, army troops and IAF air warriors wrote the manuals on the fly quite literally.



Mi-4 helicopters air-lifting 4/5 Gorkha Regiment to Sylhet. (Image via X @adgpi)

Source: [ADGPI](#)

After landing in Sylhet, it was realised that the Pakistani pull-out information was false, and the 202 Pak Infantry Brigade was securely established in Sylhet. The 313 Infantry Brigade, with the fall of Maulavi Bazar, had joined the Sylhet garrison.¹² The Pakistani side was represented by 31 (Pak) Punjab, 30 Frontier Force, 22 Baluch, and a Tochi, Khyber and Thal

⁸Ujjwal Shrotryia. (2023, December 7). On This Day, In 1971, Army And Air-Force Conducted India's First-Ever Heli-Lift In The Bangladeshi City Of Sylhet, Hastening The Surrender At Dhaka. Retrieved January 17, 2025, from Swarajya by Kovai Media Private Limited website: <https://swarajyamag.com/defence/on-this-day-in-1971-army-and-air-force-conducted-indias-first-ever-heli-lift-in-the-bangladeshi-city-of-sylhet>

⁹ Isser, R. (n.d.). Sagat and Helicopters True Pillars of Victory. Retrieved from https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/10_Rajesh%20Isser.pdf

¹⁰ Special Heli Borne Ops – Sylhet and Meghna. (2020, July 21). Retrieved January 17, 2025, from Indian Air Force website: <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/iaf/history/1971war/special-heli-borne-ops-sylhet-and-meghna/>

¹¹ Prasad, S.N.& Thapliyal, U P. (2014). The India-Pakistan War of 197; A History. Natraj Publishers

¹² *ibid*

Scouts Battalion. Further, the garrison was supported by 171 Mortar Battery (120 mm) and 31 Field Regiment.

There were some intense small arms, mortar and artillery firing from Pakistan's side, which was retaliated by 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES Company attacks that were launched to retrieve some of the areas from Pakistanis. The Pakistan Army also suffered casualties on troops and vehicles that resulted from ambushes by the Indian side. There were a few air attacks aimed at the Pak positions, and the 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES list of casualties included 12 dead and 40 injured at Sylhet.



Mi-4 Z-613 being used to evacuate a wounded soldier. Photo Courtesy: Late Maj Gen Ashok Kalyan Verma

Source: <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/iaf/history/1971war/special-heli-borne-ops-sylhet-and-meghna/>

Due to the Pakistani Army's massive demolition of bridges and roads, the 59 Mountain Brigade (less than one Battalion) was asked to approach the Kulaura-Fenchuganj-Sylhet axis on 10 December and capture Sylhet. On the other hand, 6 RAJPUT from Kailashahar on 10 December successfully and safely reached Dak Bunglow, Fenchuganj. This led to the launch of Operation Secure Kusiyara River Bank by 0500 hours on 11 December. After a fierce fight, 6 RAJPUT captured the Northern bank, and cleared the area up to the Illaspur ferry. Six Pakistani ORs were captured with a considerable quantity of arms and ammunition. The Pakistani Army had suffered significant casualties, too.

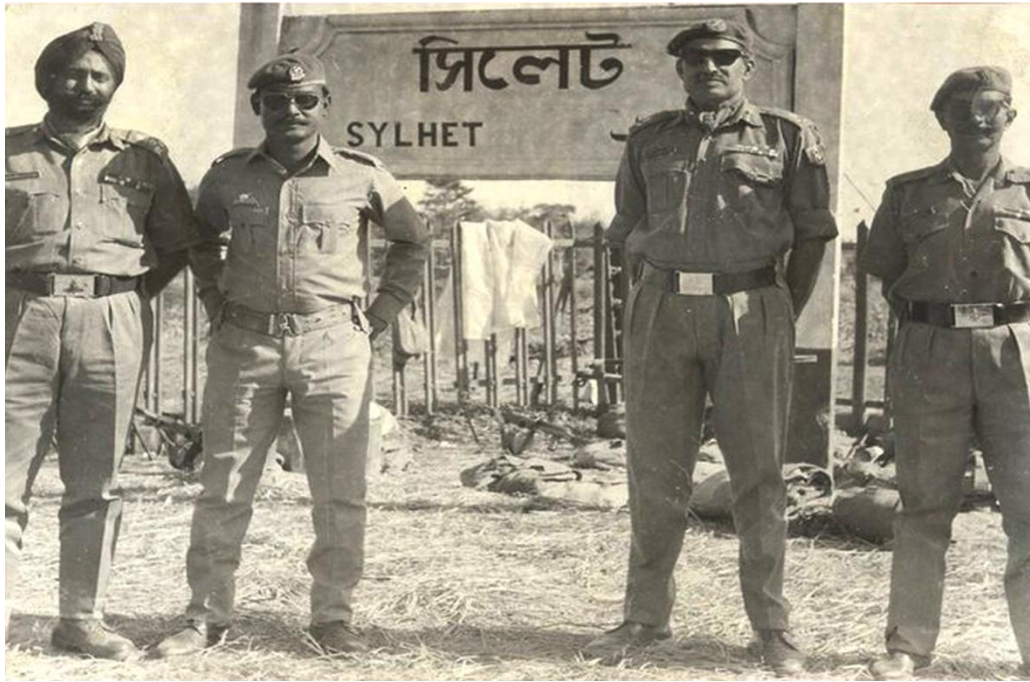
After securing Magla Bazar, resistance was faced at Mullergaon. Marshy terrain delayed the Army's plan for a night attack; by the following day of 14 December, the Kola Bil area was captured by 1100 hours, and the Pakistanis fled, leaving 15 bodies and some weapons. A

roadblock at the Kola Bill area by 9 GUARDS led to the capture of the vehicle carrying an officer, eight wounded soldiers and 45 other troops.

Capture Of Sylhet

The final seizure started with 3 PUNJAB (ex-81 Mountain Brigade) was placed under 59 Mountain Brigade and reached Kitta on 13 December. On the same day, 9 GUARDS advanced from Mangla Bazar along the Chhabdalpur-Kitta axis, engaging Pakistan forces at Daadpur. There was a joint attack by 3 PUNJAB and 9 GUARDS while capturing the position; there were a few casualties: 10 regular and 7 EPCAF Men were killed, and 7 ORs were wounded. On the same night, the Sylhet Railway Station was attacked and held by a Company-sized force. Intense fighting lasted until 0645 hours on 14 December, resulting in 17 regulars and 12 EPCAF men killed, 4 ORs of 22 Baluch and 10 EPCAF men captured. Pakistani forces withdrew to the Northern bank of the Surma River, leaving the southern bank secured by the morning of 14 December. The Indian Army had casualties like 5 ORs killed and 1 Officer, 1 JCO, 14 ORs were wounded.

The Echo Force, with 5/5 GORKHA Rifles and a few Mukti Bahini companies, advanced towards Dauki, under 8 Mountain Division. Through the Jaintiapur-Darbasth-Sylhet axis, they finally positioned at Sylhet on the Northeast after capturing a few areas on their way. On 12 December, 5/5 GORKHA RIFLES joined the advance from Kanairghat to Chiknagul. By 13 December, they captured Balipara with the help of 86 BSF and Mukti Fauj leaving twenty Pakistani casualties killed and ten wounded and taking two ORs of 31 (Pak) as prisoners. On 15 December, 5/5 GORKHA Rifles engaged and captured Khadimnagar by 1020 hours on 16 December, despite strong defences. They pursued retreating forces to Sylhet, securing The Gas Company and Radio Station by one Company of 86 Border Security Force. 11 Pakistanis were killed and 14 wounded in the operation. By 17 December the BSF secured Latu, Juri, and Barlekha with 84 and 87 BSF battalions. 104 BSF Battalion secured the Srimangal, Shaistaganj and Habigunj areas.



Indian Army Officers at Sylhet Railway Station

Source: [ADGPI](#)

Pakistani Army's Surrender

Since 09 December, the Indian Army kept the Sylhet garrison surrounded. There were no direct infantry attacks on the main town, but the Indian Air Force flew almost 56 missions over Sylhet between 08 December and 15 December. On 16 December, morning, the Garrison Commander in Sylhet offered to surrender. A meeting was held between the Commanders of the 59 Mountain Brigade, the Pakistani Garrison, and the 313 Pakistani Infantry Brigade to discuss the terms of surrender on 17 December. There was a total of 6,555 Pakistani Armed Forces who surrendered including 107 Officers (3 Brig and one Col), 219 Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs), and 6,229 Other Ranks (ORs) who made a formal surrender at Sylhet.

The Sylhet area, surrounded on three sides by Indian territory was painfully vulnerable to attack. With only two weak brigades (202 and 313 of 14 Division) to cover the long, twisting border, the prospects for a successful defense were dim. As in other regions, the available military forces were insufficient for the scale of the task. A heterogeneous mix of East Pakistan Rifles, Mujahids, Razakars, and Civil Armed Forces from West Pakistan were deployed to supplement the largely inadequate regular Pakistan Army units. These forces were tasked with operating in small, scattered detachments over extensive and dispersed areas.

Moreover, the newly raised 202 Brigade, tasked with covering 61 miles of the frontier, had only one regular battalion (31 Punjab), some paramilitary troops, and five guns. This limited force was further strained by the misjudgment of Pakistani commanders, who, influenced by India's 8 Mountain Division and Bangladesh's "Z Force," believed the primary advance would come from the north and east. Consequently, 202 Brigade was deployed in these areas, while the 313 Brigade's two regular battalions were ill-prepared for the surprise Indian attack from

another direction. Despite a setback at Dhalai, Indian forces secured significant terrain before 3 December, including key areas like the Karimganj salient and the Shamsdernagar-Kalaura region.

Furthermore, Sylhet was also under pressure by 1 East Bengal Rifles commanded by Major Ziaur Rahman, a future president of Bangladesh. While the Indians were advancing, the Pakistanis suffered from command problems. Through a series of confused decisions, 313 Brigade withdrew towards Sylhet to be uselessly encircled instead of withdrawing toward Ashuganj where it might have helped slow the Indian advance. As a result, both Pakistani brigades remained trapped in this remote town until they surrendered on 16 December.¹³ Lieutenant Colonel AB Harollikar, the Commanding Officer of the 4th Battalion, 5th GORKHA RIFLES, for his exceptional gallantry and leadership in Sylhet Operation, was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra.¹⁴



Two Pakistani Brigadiers Signed Surrender Documents in presence of the then Commanding Officer 4/5 GR(FF), Lt Col A B Harollikar

Source: ADGPI

Sylhet was an outstanding victory; despite being there two Pakistani Brigades, they failed to take part in the defence of Dhaka. Although the strength of the surrendered enemy was more

¹³ Gill, J.H. (2003). An Atlas of the 1971 India-Pakistan War: The Creation of Bangladesh. National Defence University. Washington DC

¹⁴ Battles that Made History – Defstrat. (2021). Retrieved January 17, 2025, from Defstrat.com website: https://www.defstrat.com/magazine_articles/battles-that-made-history-12/

than that of the attacking Indian Forces, the Indians had a landslide victory, and the troops that took part in the operation were awarded the Battle Honour “Sylhet”.¹⁵

Conclusion

The surrender of the Sylhet garrison on December 16, 1971, marked a significant victory in the Bangladesh Liberation War. Within seven days, the Indian Army penetrated challenging riverine terrain, isolated two Pakistani infantry brigades, and forced their surrender without physically capturing the city. This operation showcased the Indian Army's ability to achieve strategic objectives through rapid and innovative manoeuvres.

Key factors in Pakistan's defeat included isolation, hostile local populations, low morale, poor logistics, and the impact of Indian air superiority, which disrupted their movements and defence. Indian forces capitalised on these vulnerabilities, bypassing defensive positions and threatening enemy rear lines.

The operation highlighted the critical coordination between infantry, artillery, engineers, and the Air Force. The Corps of Engineers played a vital role in overcoming terrain challenges, while the heliborne insertion of 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES, despite risks, was a groundbreaking manoeuvre. Sylhet underscored the importance of joint planning, adaptive logistics, and innovation in modern warfare, offering valuable lessons for future operations.

¹⁵ Col Sarkar, B. (2020, December 8). Battle of Sylhet 1971 War. Retrieved January 17, 2025, from Indian Defence Review website: <https://indiandefencereview.com/battle-of-sylhet-1971-war/>

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